

Message Text

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TAGS: PINT, PGOV, PDEV, UK

SUBJECT: DEVOLUTION: SITUATION REPORT ON SCOTLAND

REF: (A) LONDON 18313; (B) LONDON 452; (C) LONDON 623

SUMMARY - THIS CABLE ASSESSES THE CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION IN SCOTLAND. IT IS LARGELY BASED ON EMBOFF'S RECENT TRIP TO SCOTLAND AND IMPRESSIONS GAINED FROM THAT BRIEF, BUT INTENSIVE, EXPOSURE. DEVOLUTION, THOUGH NOT THE OVERRIDING ISSUE WITH THE SCOTTISH PUBLIC (THE ECONOMY. JOBS AND PRICES SCORE HIGHER ON POLLS), CLEARLY DOMINATES THE ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE MEDIA. THE LABOR GOVERNMENT IS ACTIVELY SELLING ITS DEVOLUTION PROPOSALS, WHILE COPING WITH A WEAKENING POLITICAL BASE AND DIVIDED PARTY IN SCOTLAND. SCOTTISH NATIONALISTS, ENJOYING INCREASED POPULARITY, STRUGGLE TO OSCURE THEIR SEPARATIST IMAGE, RECONCILE INTERNAL DIFFERENCES AND LEARN TO EXERCISE POWER. THE TORIES ARE IN DISARRAY, DIVIDED ON ALL ASPECTS OF DEVOLUTION EXCEPT OPPOSITION TO THE GOVERNMENT'S SCHEME, AND IN JEOPARDY OF LOSING THE GROUND REGAINED SINCE THE LAST

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ELECTIONS. THE LIBERALS, THOUGH STILL A FACTOR IN SCOT-

TISH ELECTORAL POLITICS, APPEAR ALMOST IRRELEVANT IN DEVOLUTION DEBATE. THE OUTLOOK, ACCORDINGLY, IS CONFUSED AND UNCERTAIN, ACCENTUATING THE FLUIDITY INHERENT IN THE FOUR- (OR POSSIBLY FIVE-) PARTY POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF SCOTLAND. END SUMMARY.

1. GOVERNMENT/LABOR - THE LABOR PARTY'S TRADITIONAL POLITICAL BASE IN SCOTLAND WITHSTOOD THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY (SNP) ASSAULT IN THE OCTOBER 1974 ELECTION, IN LARGE PART BECAUSE LABOR HAD A CREDIBLE COMMITMENT TO DEVOLUTION. TORY SUPPORT IN THAT ELECTION COLLAPSED, DROPPING FROM 33 PERCENT IN FEBRUARY 1974 TO 24 PERCENT IN OCTOBER, AND LEAVING THE CONSERVATIVES IN THIRD PLACE ELECTORALLY. INITIAL REACTION IN SCOTLAND TO THE DEVOLUTION WHITE PAPER (REF A), ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SCOTTISH LABOR PARTY (SLP -- REF B) AND COMMONS' HOSTILE REACTION TO WHITE PAPER (REF C), HAVE BROUGHT THE GOVERNMENT'S ABILITY TO DELIVER ON ITS DEVOLUTION COMMITMENT INTO QUESTION AND UNDERMINED CREDIBILITY OF THE COMMITMENT ITSELF. GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO THESE CHALLENGES HAS BEEN TWO-FOLD: TO MOUNT AN INTENSIVE "EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGN" IN SCOTLAND TO SELL THE WHITE PAPER (SIX MINISTERS, INCLUDING TWO CABINET MEMBERS, SPENT JANUARY 17-18 WEEK-END IN SCOTLAND, AND THIS LEVEL OF EFFORT WILL CONTINUE), AND TO ELICIT VIEWS OF SCOTTISH PEOPLE ON SYSTEMATIC BASIS THROUGH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS. LOCAL OFFICIALS, REGARDLESS OF THEIR PERSONAL VIEWS AS TO DESIRABILITY OF DEVOLVED GOVERNMENT, OVERWHELMINGLY BELIEVE WHITE PAPER PROPOSALS, IF ENACTED, WOULD SATISFY SCOTTISH ASPIRATIONS FOR DEVOLVED POWER. THEY ALSO BELIEVE GOVERNMENT'S STRATEGY -- EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGN COUPLED WITH LOCAL INPUT -- WOULD OVERCOME MUCH OF INITIAL NEGATIVE REACTION TO WHITE PAPER. THEY TEND TO DISCOUNT SNP GAINS IN TWO RECENT LOCAL BY-ELECTIONS, BELIEVING THAT THESE TURNED ON LOCAL ISSUES AND PERSONALITIES, RATHER THAN DEVOLUTION. SCOTTISH COUNCIL OF LABOR PARTY (SCLP) OFFICIALS EXPRESSED SIMILAR VIEWS TO EMBOFF, BUT WERE MORE WORRIED ABOUT POSSIBLE ELECTORAL IMPLICATIONS OF NEWLY FOUNDED SLP (REF B) THAN WHITE PAPER PER SE. LABOR MPS FROM SCOTLAND, HOWEVER, WERE TROUBLED BY BOTH CONSIDERATIONS

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AND POSSIBLE "ENGLISH BACKLASH" IN COMMONS AS WELL. THEIR JUDGMENTS AS TO LIKELY SUCCESS OF GOVERNMENT STRATEGY VARIED WIDELY, AS DID THEIR ASSESSMENTS OF SLP'S LIKELY IMPACT, MPS, HOWEVER, SHARED WITH SCLP OFFICIALS GROWING CONCERN OVER OPINION POLL DATA SHOWING DETERIORATING LABOR SUPPORT.

2. SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY - SNP LEADERS WERE SOMEWHAT

LESS EUPHORIC OVER CURRENT SITUATION THAN OUTSIDE OBSERVERS MIGHT EXPECT. WHILE PLEASED WITH POLITICAL PREFERENCES EXPRESSED IN OPINION POLLS AND SUCCESS IN RECENT LOCAL BY-ELECTIONS, SNP LEADERS ARE TROUBLED BY STATIC NATURE OF SCOTTISH OPINION ON INDEPENDENCE WHICH SEEMS TO BE HOLDING STEADY AT SOMETHING LESS THAN 20 PERCENT.

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THIS CONCERN HAS ACCENTUATED DICHOTOMY BETWEEN SEPARATISTS AND DEVOLUTIONISTS IN SNP WHICH, IN TURN, HAS DIVIDED LEADERSHIP. OFFICIAL STATEMENTS, ACCORDINGLY, STRESS THE SNP'S DESIRE TO COLLABORATE WITH ENGLAND AND FUZZ THE BASIC SEPARATION ISSUE, WHILE WELCOMING DEVOLUTION AND PROTESTING THEIR WILLINGNESS TO WORK CONSTRUCTIVELY IN DEVOLVED ASSEMBLY. SNP'S LEADERSHIP ALSO MANIFESTED SOME DISSATISFACTION WITH ITS PARLIAMENTARY DELEGATION, BEING PARTICULARLY CRITICAL OF PARLIAMENTARY GROUP'S ANNOUNCEMENT IT WOULD SEEK EARLY DEFEAT OF GOVERNMENT -- A STATEMENT WHICH WAS NOT CLEARED WITH PARTY. THIS STATEMENT WAS QUICKLY FOLLOWED BY CHRYSLER RESCUE IN WHICH SNP SUPPORTED GOVERNMENT. SNP OFFICIALS WITH WHOM EMBOFF SPOKE ALSO PROFESSED CONCERN OVER POSSIBLE IMPACT

OF SLP. BELIEVING IT MIGHT HURT SNP AS MUCH AS LABOR IN GENERAL ELECTION. ONE SNP OFFICIAL INDICATED PARTY WAS HAVING TROUBLE GETTING ITS OWN ANTI-WHITE PAPER CAMPAIGN UNDERWAY AND SUGGESTED GOVERNMENT EFFORT MIGHT SUCCEED. MOST NOTABLE CHANGE SINCE LAST YEAR WAS ABSENCE (OR MARKED WEAKENING OF) LEADERSHIP'S ARROGANT CONFIDENCE IN SNP'S FUTURE PROSPECTS. THIS MAY BE AS ATTRIBUTABLE TO NORMAL ADJUSTMENTS REQUIRED BY ANY NEWLY SUCCESSFUL POLITICAL OFFICIAL USE

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LITICAL PARTY (E.G., RECONCILIATION OF INTERNAL DIFFERENCES, ADJUSTING TO RESPONSIBILITIES OF POWER) AS TO CURRENT POLITICAL UNCERTAINTIES IN SCOTLAND, THOUGH BOTH ARE TO SOME EXTENT MUTUALLY REINFORCING.

3. CONSERVATIVES - OPINION POLLS SUGGEST TORIES HAVE REGAINED SOME OF GROUND LOST IN OCTOBER ELECTION (REINFORCING BELIEF THAT TACTICAL VOTING PLAYED SIGNIFICANT PART IN SNP GAINS), BUT PARTY IS BADLY DIVIDED ON DEVOLUTION. DEPTH OF DISAGREEMENT WAS EVIDENT AT RECENT SCOTTISH CONSERVATIVE CONFERENCE WHERE MINIMALIST OFFICIAL POSITION WAS CHALLENGED BY HARD-LINE ANTI-DEVOLUTIONISTS WHO LOST FORMAL VOTE BY 103 TO 60. AT LEAST TWO CONSERVATIVE MPS FROM SCOTLAND AND SCOTTISH YOUTH ORGANIZATION, HOWEVER, FAVOR GREATER MEASURE OF DEVOLUTION THAN TORY LEADERSHIP IS WILLING TO ACCEPT. GREATEST CONSERVATIVE WEAKNESS, HOWEVER, IS ITS INABILITY TO COME FORWARD WITH DETAILED DEVOLUTION ALTERNATIVE -- OFFICIAL POSITION APPEARS TO ENVISAGE SCOTTISH MPS MEETING PERIODICALLY IN EDINBURGH TO HANDLE PRELIMINARY STAGES OF LEGISLATION AFFECTING SCOTLAND.

4. LIBERALS - ACCOUNTING FOR 8 PERCENT OF THE SCOTTISH VOTE IN OCTOBER 1974, LIBERALS REMAIN A FACTOR IN SCOTTISH POLITICS, THEY HAVE WELL DEFINED DEVOLUTION PROPOSAL: ESTABLISHMENT OF FEDERAL SYSTEM FOR ALL OF UK. THEIR PROPOSAL, HOWEVER, DOES NOT SEEM GERMANE TO CURRENT DEBATE IN SCOTLAND, LEAVING THE PARTY STRUGGLING WITH RELEVANCE PROBLEM WHICH IS AT LEAST AS SERIOUS AS THOSE FACED BY LABOR AND CONSERVATIVES. LIBERALS TEND TO SURVIVE ON HOPE, AND IT IS NOT INCONCEIVABLE THAT FEDERALISM COULD BECOME PREVALENT IF WHITE PAPER PROPOSALS ARE STUDIED IN COMMONS.

5. COMMENT - POLL DATA FROM SCOTLAND ARE SUBJECT TO CONTRADICTORY INTERPRETATION, ESPECIALLY AS REGARDS THEIR LONG TERM IMPLICATIONS. ALTHOUGH THE SNP CURRENTLY LEADS THE POPULARITY SWEEPSTAKES, THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF SCOTS REJECT THE IDEA OF AN INDEPENDENT SCOTLAND. DEVOLUTION IS CLEARLY DESIRED BY MOST SCOTTISH VOTERS, BUT

THEY ARE MORE CONCERNED WITH BREAD AND BUTTER ISSUES.
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ACCORDINGLY, IT MAY BE ASSUMED THAT THE SNP'S BEDROCK
SUPPORT DOES NOT EXCEED 20 PERCENT OF THE ELECTORATE,
WITH THE BALANCE BEING UP FOR GRABS. WHETHER THE LABOR
PARTY -- TORN BY INTERNAL STRIFE, QUESTIONABLE SCOTTISH
LEADERSHIP AND A CREDIBILITY PROBLEM -- THE CONSERVATIVE
PARTY -- DIVIDED AND BANKRUPT ON DEVOLUTION -- OR THE
LIBERAL PARTY -- VIRTUALLY IRRELEVANT AT THE MOMENT --
WILL BE ABLE TO EXPLOIT THE SNP'S APPARENT WEAKNESSES IS
ANOTHER QUESTION. AT THE MOMENT THERE ARE FEW GROUNDS
FOR OPTIMISM.

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